DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 336 673 CG 023 647

AUTHOR Buchanan, Christy; Maccoby, Eleanor
TITLE Variation in Adjustment to Divorce: The Feeling of Being Caught between Parents.
PUB DATE Apr 91
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (Seattle, WA, April 18-20, 1991).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adjustment (to Environment); *Adolescents; *Divorce; *Family Relationship; Parent Child Relationship

ABSTRACT

The variability of children's adjustment to parental conflict and divorce has been well-documented. The family systems literature stresses the importance of a strong parental subsystem that stands apart from the child. This subsystem is clearly at risk in situations of divorce. The study described in this paper examined children's feelings of being caught between two parents during divorce. Data for this study were taken from the Stanford Child Custody Study conducted from 1984-1988 in which 1,600 parents from over 1,100 families were interviewed. Adolescents (N=522), taken from families who participated in the parent study, were interviewed 4.5 years after their parents' separation. The results indicated that: (1) the older the adolescent the more likely he or she was to feel caught; (2) girls were more likely to feel caught than were boys; (3) the higher the parental discord or hostility the more likely adolescents were to feel caught; (4) effects of parents' coparenting style were intensified for adolescents in the dual-residence group; (5) feeling caught was related to higher levels of depression/anxiety and higher levels of deviance; and (6) the higher the level of parental discord the more likely adolescents were to feel caught between parents and the more adolescents felt caught the more depressed they were. The discussion is supplemented by 11 slides. (ABL)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

SRCD 1991



# Variation in adjustment to divorce: The role of feeling caught between parents

Christy Buchanan and Eleanor Maccoby

ED336673

The variability in children's adjustment to parental conflict and divorce has been well-documented. A primary aim of the Stanford Adolescent Custody Study was to learn about when and why adolescent children adjust poorly to parental divorce and conflict.

Based on (a) the family systems literature suggesting the importance of triangulation and boundary diffusion; and (b) the divorce literature suggesting the importance of children's loyalty conflicts, we investigated the role of feeling caught between parents in adjustment to conflict and divorce.

The family systems literature stresses the importance of a strong parental subsystem that stands apart from the child. This subsystem is clearly at risk in situations of divorce. When parents try to form alliances with a child against the other parent, or when the boundaries between the parent-parent and parent-child subsystems become unclear--phenomena not limited to divorce situations but probably more likely in divorce--children are likely to be drawn into parental negotiations, tensions, or active conflicts. For example, the child might become a confidant to one or both parents, or carry messages between parents. These types of behaviors are expected to create stress and confusion for the child.

CG023647

The divorce literature, on the other hand, often refers to children's feelings of conflicting loyalties. Conflicting loyalties are presumed to occur when children feel love for and allegiance to both parents, yet fear the consequences

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Christy Buchanan
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

of loyalty to both. Although loyalty conflicts have often been used as post-hoc explanations for negative adjustment outcomes, they have rarely been studied empirically. We know little about what actually causes or exacerbates loyalty conflicts after divorce, or what their consequences really are.

In our study we have integrated these approaches, and looked at children's feelings of being caught between parents. [SLIDE #1 HERE] Our measure of feeling caught between parents is, in part, a measure of children's feelings (how often do you feel caught; do you ever hesitate to talk about one parent in front of the other) and in part, a measure of parental behavior--though admittedly a measure of parental behavior as reported by the adolescent (being asked to carry messages, being asked questions about the other home--and of course even being hesitant to talk may indirectly indicate parental behaviors that make it difficult or frightening for a child to talk about the other parent). Note that we asked three of the questions separately for mothers and for fathers, and, in creating the "caught" score, took the maximum of the two scores. We took this approach because we thought that it probably only took one parent participating in these behaviors to cause stress for the child. The range of scores is 0-12, and the mean is 4.8, below the midpoint of the scale, suggesting that many adolescents do not feel caught between parents, or feel so only mildly.

We examined this concept in the hope that it would

a) help us understand the variability in children's reponse to divorce (and parental conflict) AND

b) shed light on between-group differences (e.g., differences between situations of high and low parental conflict; differences in the adjustment of girls vs. boys) that have been documented in regard to post-divorce adjustment. Are

the group differences due, at least in part, to different tendencies to become caught between parents?

Specifically, we addressed three questions [SLIDE #2]:

(1) What predicts adolescents' feelings of being caught between parents?

(2) Do feelings of being caught between parents explain variability in adjustment outcomes?

(3) Do feelings of being caught between parents mediate between characteristics of the child or family (e.g., parental conflict, sex of child) and adjustment outcomes?

BACKGROUND ON STUDY

Parent Study: From 1984 through 1988, the Stanford Child Custody Study interviewed over 1600 parents from over 1100 families. Parents were recruited from the court records of those who filed for divorce in two California counties between September 1984 and March 1985. At the time of filing for divorce, eligible parents had not been separated for more than 13 months; most that were eventually recruited had been separated for only 3 months. Parents were interviewed at 3 time points following separation (6 months, 1 1/2 years, 3 1/2 years).

Adolescent Study: Adolescents from the families who participated in the parent study were interviewed 4 1/2 years after their parents' separation (1 year following the third parent intervew). For recruitment, children who were between 10 1/2 and 18 years old were targeted. [SLIDE #3] 522 adolescents were recruited (81% participation rate). The sample was about half male and about half female.

[SLIDE #4] 70% of the adolescents lived primarily with their mothers, 19% primarily with their fathers, and 10% lived in a dual residence arrangement. Dual residence was defined as at least 4 overnights every two weeks with each parent. At minimum, then, an adolescent had to be spending, say, Friday and Saturday night every weekend with one parent and the remainder of the weeks with the other. We do have several adolescents in this group (close to 60%), however, who are splitting time more evenly between parents: e.g., spending 3 days with one parent and 4 with the other; rotating back and forth from week to week, etc.

(1) PREDICTORS OF FEELING CAUGHT

Our first question concerns predictors of feeling caught between parents.

[SLIDE #5]

Age: The older the adolescent the more likely she or he was to feel caught (correlation of .12).

Sex: Girls were more likely to report feeling caught than were boys (mean for girls=5.1, for boys=4.4).

(Age and sex were controlled in remaining analyses).

Of the other predictors we examined, we are going to concentrate on two in this presentation: the coparenting relationship and residential arrangement.

The coparenting relationship: Coparenting (parental conflict, hostility, cooperative communication as reported by parents) was strongly related to feelings of being caught. [SLIDE #6] The higher parental discord or hostility at the Time 3 parent interview, the more likely adolescents were to feel caught at Time 4. The more parents were trying to communication and coordinate with one another at Time 3, the less likely adolescents were to feel caught.

Although our measures of discord and cooperative communication were related (negatively), parents could fall at different points on the two scales. For example, parents could be high in conflict and low in cooperation (these we call conflictual parents); alternatively,they could be low in conflict and high in cooperative communication (cooperative parents); finally, they could be low in conflict and low in cooperation (these parents we refer to as disengaged). We were interested in the pattern of coparenting as it related to feelings of being caught: specifically, what is the impact of parents being disengaged on adolescents' feelings of being caught? If conflict is the overriding factor leading to feelings of being caught, then adolescents of disengaged parents would not be expected to feel caught between parents. However, it might be that when parents are disengaged, adolescents are placed in the role of carrying out whatever negotiations must occur between parents, and this may lead to more feelings of being caught. [SLIDE #7]. What we see here is that adolescents were most likely to feel caught when parents are actively conflictual. Adolescents of disengaged parents were less "caught" than adolescents of

conflictual parents, but more "caught" than adolescents whose parents were actively cooperating.

Residential arrangement: We were interested particularly in the implications of dual residence for feeling caught between parents. It has been suggested in policy circles that children who spend substantial time in both households will be more vulnerable to loyalty conflicts--even if those parents are not actively fighting. In our sample, however, residential arrangement in itself was not significantly related to feeling caught.

But what if we consider the coparenting relationship as well? If dual-resident children have parents who are in high conflict, do these children then become more susceptible to loyalty conflicts than do adolescents in high conflict but sole-residential arrangements?

To answer this question, we used regression to predict "caught" with age and sex of adolescent, the residential arrangement (sole vs. dual), coparenting (discord, cooperative communication OR hostility) and the interaction of residential arrangement and coparenting. The interaction terms in these regression equations were significant. What, then, did the interaction look like? [SLIDE #8] To depict the interactions graphically, we have plotted the predicted value of "caught" for different levels of discord (in the first slide) and cooperative communication (the slide I'll show next). The results indicated that at low levels of parental conflict, dual-resident adolescents were least likely to feel caught. But at high levels of conflict dual-resident adolescents were the most likely to feel caught. [SLIDE #9] Similarly, in this slide we see that at high levels of parental cooperative communication, dual-resident adolescents were least likely to feel caught, but that at low levels of parental cooperative

communication, they were most likely to feel caught. Thus, it appears that the effects of parents' coparenting style are intensified for adolescents in the dual-residence group. In terms of feeling caught between parents, dual residence can be the best or the worst of worlds.

(2) RELATION BETWEEN CAUGHT AND ADJUSTMENT OUTCOMES

Our second question concerned the relation between feelings of being caught and psychosocial adjustment outcomes. [SLIDE #10] We found that feeling caught was related to higher levels of depression/anxiety and higher levels of deviance, controlling for age and sex of adolescent. Thus, the concept of feeling caught explains a significant amount of variability in these adjustment outcomes.

(3) DOES CAUGHT MEDIATE BETWEEN PARENTAL CONFLICT, OR OTHER CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CHILD/FAMILY, AND ADJUSTMENT OUTCOMES?

Finally, we wanted to see whether feelings of being caught mediated relations between parental conflict, or other characteristics of the child/family, and adjustment outcomes.

Path analysis was used to address this question. First, the outcome (depression or deviance) was predicted with caught, a coparenting measure, residence, age, and sex of the adolescent. Then caught was predicted with the

coparenting variable, residence, age, and sex. The remaining variables were then correlated. I am going to show you the results of analyses where parental discord was used as the coparenting measure; the results are the same with other coparenting measures.

[SLIDE #11] Here we are predicting depression/anxiety. The main thing I want to focus on here is the indirect link between parental discord and depression through feelings of being caught. The higher parental discord, the more likely adolescents were to feel caught between parents; the more adolescents felt caught, the more depressed they were. If cooperative communication is substituted for discord, we find that higher cooperation between parents leads to a lower likelihood of being caught between parents, which in turn is related to lower levels of depression.

Thus, coparenting seems to have its effect on depression in the adolescent through its impact on adolescent's feelings of being caught.

We get similar results if we predict deviant behavior rather than depression: parental discord seems to have its effect on deviance through adolescents' tendency to feel caught between parents.

These results indicate that caught does mediate a relation between coparenting and outcomes. The model provides less evidence that it mediates other characteristics such as age and sex and outcomes (these characteristics retain strong direct paths to the outcomes of interest; the indirect paths through "caught" tend to be weak).

I want to draw two general conclusions from these findings:

** First, the concept of "caught" may help to explain why many children whose parents are in conflict (or whose parents divorce) end up exhibiting problems. When parents are in conflict, children are more likely to feel caught, and children who feel caught are more likely to experience depression/anxiety, and, to a lesser extent, participate in deviant behavior. In this sense, "caught" helps us to understand the previously-documented "between group" differences -- differences between situations of high and low parental conflict.

** The second point I want to make, however, is that parental conflict and divorce need not affect children negatively. We know that not all children exhibit the same degree of negative outcomes in response to parental conflict or parental divorce. This variability has been attributed to individual children's invulnerability or to a variety of coping resources. Our results suggest that one way in which children are shielded from the effects of divorce or conflict is to be shielded from feeling caught between parents. Although individual children may be more or less vulnerable to feeling caught between parents in situations of divorce or conflict, there are clearly things that parents can do (or refrain from doing) that will reduce the likelihood of children feeling caught between parents. Thus, children's experience of feeling caught between parents helps to explain the variability in adjustment to parental conflict and divorce.

SLIDE#1

**Feeling caught between parents** Alpha=.64

Summed composite:
N=522 Mean=4.8 (S.D. 2.9) Range=0-12

max score of:
o How often does your mother ask you to carry messages to your father?
o How often does your father ask you to carry messages to your mother?

max score of:
o Does your mother ever ask you questions about your father's home that you wish she wouldn't ask?
o Does your father ever ask you questions about your mother's home that you wish he wouldn't ask?

max score of:
o When your mother is around, how often do you hesitate to talk about things concerning your father?
o When your father is around, how often do you hesitate to talk about things concerning your mother?

o How often do you feel caught in the middle between your mother and your father?

SLIDE#2

(1) What predicts adolescents' feelings of being caught between parents?

(2) Do feelings of being caught between parents explain variability in adjustment outcomes?

(3) Do feelings of being caught between parents mediate between characteristics of the child or family (e.g., parental conflict, sex of child) and adjustment outcomes?

SLIDE #3

# STANFORD ADOLESCENT CUSTODY STUDY

N=522 adolescents, 10-18 years old

Participation rate: 81%

51% male (N=265)
49% female (N=257)

SLIDE#4

## Residential arrangement:

70% mother residence (N=366)

10% dual residence (N=51)

19% father residence (N=100)

1% other residence (N=5)

SLIDE#5

Correlation of "Caught" with Age: .12**

Mean "Caught" Scores by Sex of Adolescent:

Girls $\underline{X} = 5.1$

Boys $\underline{X} = 4.4$

$\underline{t}\ (520) = -2.69^{**}$

** $\underline{p} \leq .01$.

SLIDE#6

| Time 3 Coparenting | r | β (age and sex controlled) |
|---|---|---|
| Discord | .26**** | .27**** |
| Cooperative Communication | -.20*** | -.19*** |
| Maximum Hostility | .19**** | .19**** |

*** $p \leq .001$.
**** $p \leq .0001$.

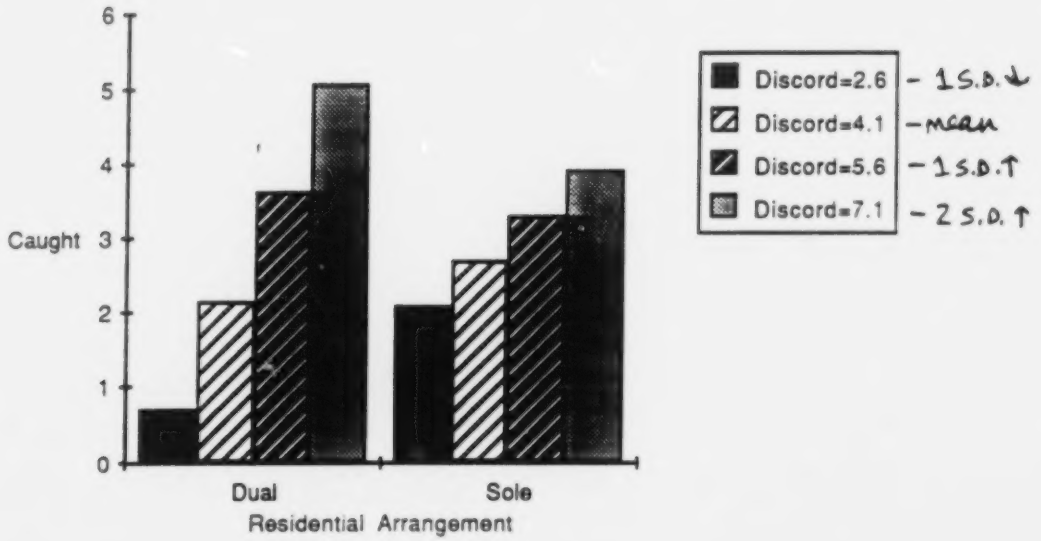
SLIDE #7

## FEELINGS OF BEING CAUGHT BY COPARENTING PATTERN

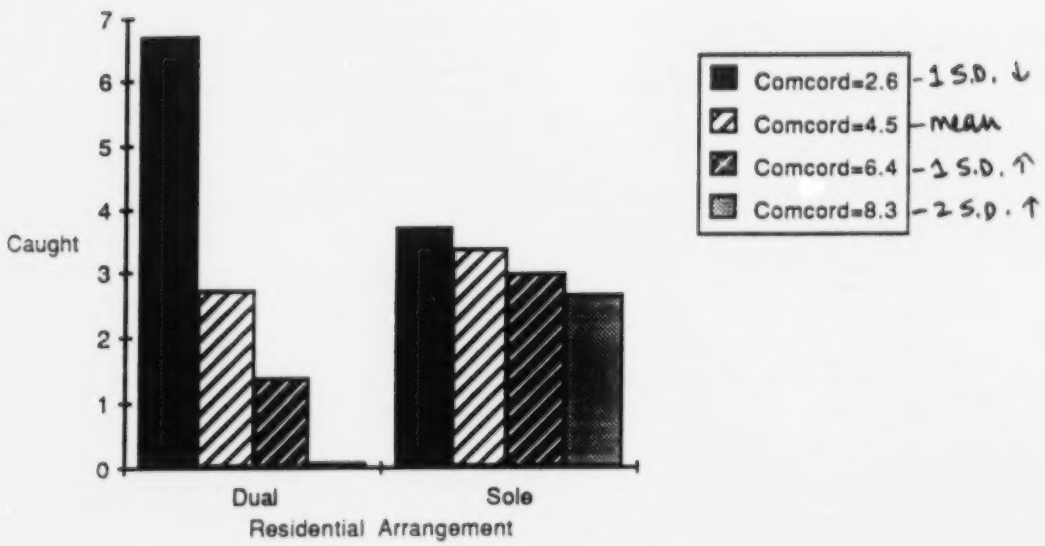
| | Conflicted | Cooperative | Disengaged |
|---|---|---|---|
| M | 6.1 | 3.7 | 4.6 |
| SD | 2.6 | 2.6 | 2.6 |
| N | 76 | 78 | 166 |

$F$ (2,315) = 16.22, $p$ = .0001

SLIDE#8


6
5
4
3
2
1
0
Caught
Dual
Sole
Residential Arrangement
Discord=2.6
Discord=4.1
Discord=5.6
Discord=7.1
- 1 S.D. ↓
- mean
- 1 S.D. ↑
- 2 S.D. ↑

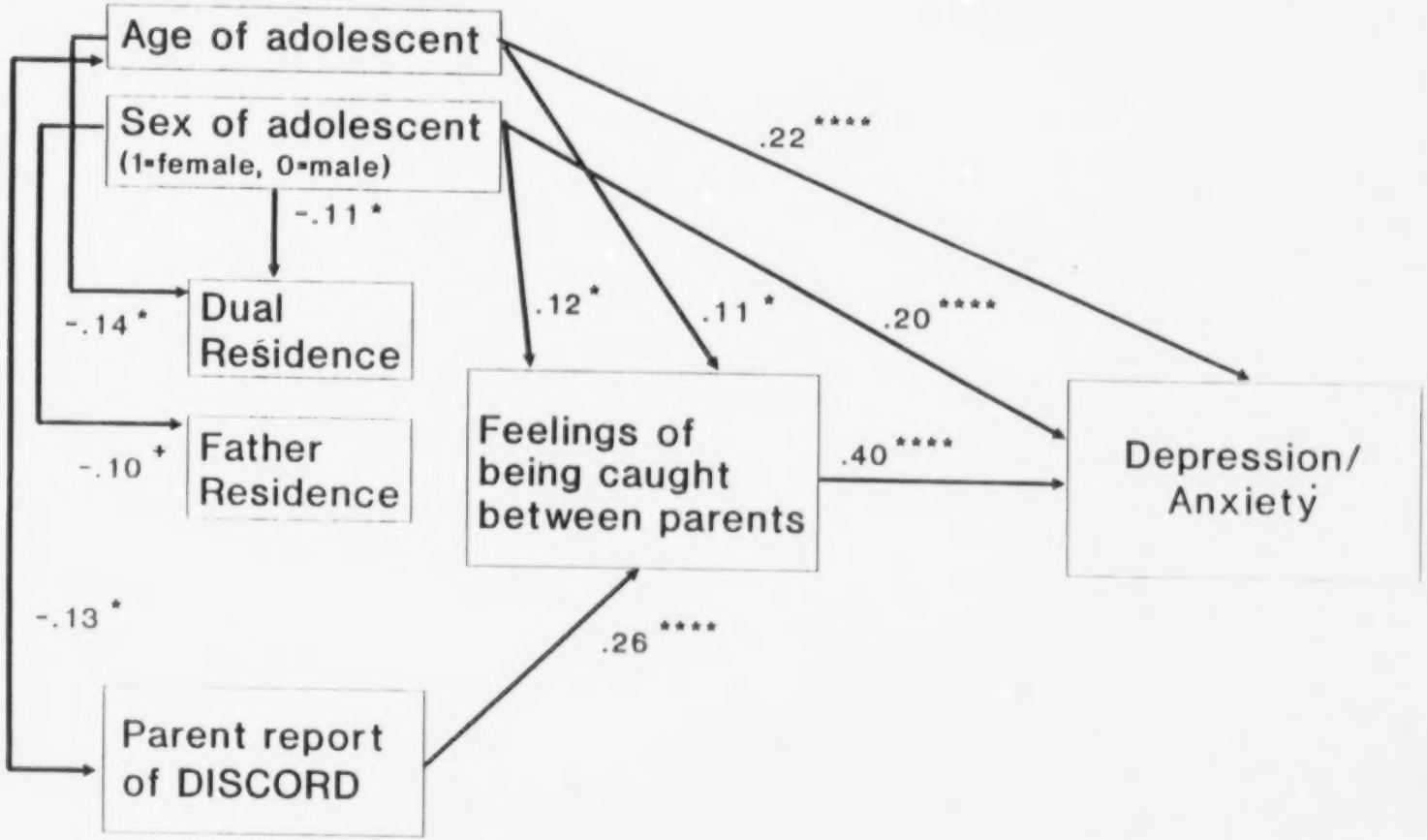
SLIDE#9


7
6
5
4
3
2
1
0
Caught
Dual
Sole
Residential Arrangement
Comcord=2.6
Comcord=4.5
Comcord=6.4
Comcord=8.3
-1 S.D. ↓
mean
-1 S.D. ↑
-2 S.D. ↑

SLIDE #10

| Adjustment Outcome | r | β (age and sex controlled) |
|---|---|---|
| Depression/ Anxiety | .41**** | .36**** |
| Deviant Behavior | .23**** | .18*** |

*** $p \leq .001$.
**** $p \leq .0001$.


Age of adolescent
Sex of adolescent
(1=female, 0=male)
-.11 *
.22 ****
-.14 *
Dual
Residence
.12 *
.11 *
.20 ****
-.10 +
Father
Residence
Feelings of
being caught
between parents
.40 ****
Depression/
Anxiety
-.13 *
.26 ****
Parent report
of DISCORD





SLIDE #11